

Young Adult Literature as the Centerpiece of an Anti-Bullying Program in Middle School

This We Believe Characteristics

- *Shared vision that guides decisions*
- *An inviting, supportive, and safe environment*
- *Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory*
- *Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity*
- *Multifaceted guidance and support services*

By Carol Hillsberg & Helene Spak

“**T**iny, jagged hunks of mortar were being hurled at me from all sides. ... Red welts covered my skin. I didn’t know what was worse, the physical or the emotional agony.” (Blanco, 2003). This is one incident in Jodee Blanco’s troubling autobiography, *Please Stop Laughing at Me*, in which she reflects upon her experiences in school as a victim of vicious bullying.

In 2001 *The Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that more than 160,000 students skip school every day because they are anxious and fearful of being bullied by other students (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001). This same report noted that almost one-third of students between the ages of 11 and 18 have experienced some form of bullying while in school. These statistics, coupled with concerns over school violence, have caught the attention of both parents and educators.

Because of these concerns, we created an anti-bullying program with young adult literature as its centerpiece. In this article, we explain the nature of bullying, focusing on its prevalence in schools. We then describe the comprehensive anti-bullying

program in place at Wood Oaks Junior High School, Northbrook, Illinois, in which young adult literature and other components are used to combat bullying.

Description of Bullying

In the 1970s researchers began to take a serious look at the causes and effects of bullying. Bullying can take many forms. It can be defined as persistent,



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Seventh graders discuss a short story related to bullying.

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Seventh graders reflect on comments made during a literature discussion on bullying.

repeated, unwelcome behavior over time, using negative actions (Olweus, 2003). These negative actions are carried out by physical contact, by cruel words, indirectly by excluding others from a group, by making inappropriate gestures or faces, or by spreading rumors. Often, there is an imbalance of power, with the more powerful individual or group attacking the weaker person or group (Mayo Clinic, 2001).

Dan Olweus notes in his article, *A Profile of Bullying*, that the percentage of students who have reported being bullied has risen nearly 50% since 1983 (Olweus, 2003). Olweus attributed this rise to negative societal developments. According to Stop Bullying Now (2004), an organization devoted to educating the public about the dangers of aggressive behaviors in school, 14% of students who are or have been bullied experience severe psychological reactions that may lead to long-term negative effects on their development. Studies have shown that bullying can have disastrous effects on the victims and on the bullies themselves. For example, according to William Coleman, professor of pediatrics at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine, bullies are four times more likely to engage in criminal behavior by age 24. Both bullies and victims are more likely to engage in substance abuse. In addition, victims have fewer friends and are more likely to be depressed (Lemonick, 2005, p. 145).

In surveys the most common type of bullying reported is verbal bullying. This type of intimidation

can include name-calling, threats, racist or sexist remarks, and teasing. Students also report being physically bullied in schools. Physical bullying can include hitting, hair pulling, biting, punching, and poking. Finally, a third type of bullying called relational bullying occurs when a student is excluded from his or her peer group. Relational bullying is most frequently observed in middle school and high school, where the formation of cliques is prevalent.

According to Coy (2001), author of several articles for *ERIC Digest*, there are two types of bullies, aggressive and passive. An aggressive bully is usually described as someone who is unable to deal with frustration. These individuals appear to be more inclined toward violence and belligerence than other children in the same age group. Passive bullies are those who team up with an aggressive bully but rarely instigate violence or intimidation themselves. Instead, a passive bully will participate in aggression toward weaker children, but he or she will continue to remain a follower of the more assertive bully.

Bullying in Schools

To discourage bullying one must understand the causes of the behavior. It is a mistake to blame large class sizes or intense academic competition. Instead, educators should look at other factors such as how the students' individual personalities relate to the class as a whole as well as the attitudes of the adults who serve as teachers and administrators in the school. In an environment where bullying is accepted as a rite of passage or an experience in character building, aggressive behaviors will flourish and perhaps even lead to an increased level of school violence (Banks, 1997).

More than two million school children in the United States are involved in bullying—either as victims or as bullies—according to a study released in April 2001 by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Tactics ranging from belittling about physical appearance or speech to hitting and pushing occur in school (Guerrero, 2001). Therefore, logic dictates that school is the venue in which to tackle these problems. Accordingly, many schools have adopted anti-bullying programs to identify the causes of bullying and to discourage this sort of aggressive behavior. If a school-wide effort to combat bullying is to be effective, it should involve many elements that exist at the school, including the content taught in the classrooms.

Because they see school as a place for learning about themselves and their peers first, middle school

students are perfectly suited for dealing with the affective domain in the classroom, alongside subject matter (Beers, 1999, p. 10). Students in grades six, seven, and eight have a sixth sense about social nuance, about cliques—about the powerful and the powerless. According to Erikson (1964), adolescents build a sense of identity during these years, and its construction is in reaction to those around them. If students are isolated, unsupported, or worse, victimized, their ability to create a healthy identity is diminished. Students so preoccupied are not available for learning, thereby creating frustrations for teachers, parents, and the students themselves.

Use of Young Adult Literature

As these problems are serious and troubling, one solution is to turn to the subject matter taught as an entry to handling them. If this can be accomplished, the students become more available for learning while being immersed in the subject matter. No course of study is a better fit for this strategy than the teaching of reading and writing. If one defines literacy, in the broadest sense, as the ability to use written and spoken language to help understand the human condition, then literature can be studied to both improve reading comprehension and peer relationships. If students are able to identify common pleasures and pains, and hopes and fears encountered in literature, and if they are able to reflect upon and write about these phenomena, their emotional growth can be affected. "The function of a piece of literature is first and always the transmission of the inner life and feelings of one individual to another. As teachers, it is our job to help in the process" (Sherrill & Ley, p. 53).

Developmentally appropriate literature that addresses the topic of bullying is a critical component of a program to combat this problem. Not only must the literature be readable, it must also be relevant to young adolescent lives. If students connect to the literature, identify with the protagonist, and relate the theme to their own experiences, they will achieve a higher level of comprehension. (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997, p. 55). This increased understanding of the text can lead to changes in affect and behavior. If the literature deals with the terrible consequences of bullying, it could help the victim and the bully. The victim may derive comfort or coping strategies from reading about another in a similar situation. In addition, the bully might begin to identify with a fictional victim, leading to empathy and the possibility for change (Pikas, 1989).

Based on this premise, we created meaningful learning experiences in literature for three grades: sixth, seventh and eighth. In searching for literature that resonates, we read every short story we could find that dealt with bullying. Our goal was to develop a school-wide campaign against bullying that featured reading, discussion, and writing as its principal weapons. Fortunately, there are many young adult stories that deal with bullies and their victims. Criteria for choosing the stories for this program were that they contain memorable protagonists, engaging plots, and thematic material that empowered the victims of bullying. After much searching and discussion, we selected six stories, two for each grade level, each written by a renowned author of young adult literature (Figure 1).

Students who are isolated, unsupported, or victimized are not available for learning.

The two stories selected for sixth grade were "A Letter From the Fringe" by Joan Bauer and "Tuesday of the Other June" by Norma Fox Mazer. In the former, an ostracized victim receives a powerful letter of support in a birthday card from a stronger student who is also "on the fringe" socially. In the latter story, a victim finally is victorious in her struggle with a bully who shares the same first name. One of the two stories for seventh graders, "Muffin" by Susan Cooper, is set in England during World War II and tells how Daisy is comforted by a

Figure 1
Literature List by Grade Level

SIXTH GRADE

"A Letter From the Fringe" by Joan Bauer (2001). In D. R. Gallo (Ed.), *On the fringe* (pp. 181–195). New York: Dial Books.

"Tuesday of the Other June" by Norma Fox Mazer (1986). In E. Segel & J. A. Smith (Eds.), *Short takes: A short story collection for young readers* (pp. 2–17). New York: Lothrop, Lee, & Shepard.

SEVENTH GRADE

"Muffin" by Susan Cooper (1996). In A. Ehrlich (Ed.), *When I was your age* (pp. 78–93). Cambridge, MA: Candlewick.

"Shortcut" by Nancy Werlin (2001). In D. R. Gallo (Ed.), *On the fringe* (pp. 49–62). New York: Dial Books.

EIGHTH GRADE

"Your Turn, Norma" by Gary Soto (1998). In G. Soto (Ed.), *Petty crimes* (pp. 60–75). San Diego: Harcourt Brace.

"Satyagraha" by Alden R. Carter (2001). In D. R. Gallo (Ed.), *On the fringe*. New York: Dial Books.

dog named Muffin, as both prove to be survivors. In “Shortcut” by Nancy Werlin, victims of bullying find confidence and power in their own alliance. In a story for eighth graders, “Your Turn, Norma” by Gary Soto, Norma derives comfort from a doll named Amber that she cares for as a surrogate baby in social studies class when both are tormented by a bully. Finally, in “Satyagraha,” Alden R. Carter describes how this nonviolent philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi can be effective against a bully on the football team.

“We are not only responsible for what we do, but also for what we do not do.”

— Molière

Selecting the literature was just the first step. We collected and researched our ideas about best practice in reading and offered the teachers pre-, during, and post-reading strategies. For example, we developed materials to activate schema and make predictions both before and during reading (Figure 2). We included graphic organizers that featured story elements such as setting, characterization, plot, point of view, style, and theme. We culled other ideas from *Mosaic of Thought* by Keene and Zimmermann (1997), including suggestions on questioning, drawing inferences, and using sensory images. To encourage active reading, we included graphic organizers that helped students analyze the elements of cause and effect in the stories. As there were two stories per grade level, there were also organizers for comparing and contrasting the two stories. We suggested writing prompts that deal with the characters, events, and ideas in the stories. It was crucial that students reflected in writing and

discussion on the ideas in the stories to connect them to bullying incidences at school.

In the poem “Everyone Is the Same,” two eighth grade girls from Wood Oaks Junior High School express the misery of victims of bullying and ostracism as well as the comfort that a friend can bring (Figure 3). It reinforces the idea that anti-bullying programs are not just for the victims and the bullies, but also for the majority of students who are passive and who stand by and watch it occur. This point is emphasized in the words of the French playwright Molière (1622–1673), “We are not only responsible for what we do, but also for what we do not do.” This quote has been displayed in all language arts classrooms.

As teachers of reading and writing, we have the ability to encourage our students to read literature and write in journals to ease their pain. (Kaywell, 2005, p. 32). In reflections written after reading and discussing the stories, many students expressed positive outcomes from the experience. For example, a sixth grade girl felt the story gave her courage and showed her how to act when a bully starts bullying. Another girl felt that the story helped her realize how bullies can be anywhere and can be stopped by speaking out. In addition, many boys felt that the story helped them stand up to bullies. Therefore, it seems the literature did provide comfort and coping strategies for some students.

School-wide Anti-bullying Efforts

Beginning in 2000, to maximize the effect of the literature, school-wide anti-bullying events were scheduled each year. Speakers, each with a meaningful, powerful message, addressed the students and the parents. For instance, Jodee Blanco, the author of *Please Stop Laughing at Me*, was particularly effective as she told her story to students, teachers, and parents. Her description of her triumph over the effects of victimization by bullies resonated with her

Figure 2
Prediction Guide

Making Predictions	Grounding Predictions	Revisiting Predictions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What will the text be about? • What will happen later in the text? • What are different possible outcomes? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are you basing your predictions on? • Are you equally confident that all of your predictions about the text will come true? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As you read, keep track of your predictions. • Are your predictions confirmed or disconfirmed? • Do you need to revise your predictions based on what you have read?
Processing Predictions		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the process of making and revisiting predictions help you to understand the text? 		

audience. One year a drama group, Imagination Theater, presented its interactive "Ease the Tease" program. The actors presented effective anti-bullying strategies, such as changing the subject and using humor, by engaging student volunteers to role-play the application of these techniques.

To strengthen the campaign against bullying, other departments at Wood Oaks Junior High contributed to the program. The social studies classes discussed historical situations in which countries and peoples had experienced bullying and brainstormed ideas that could prevent this from occurring in the future. In particular, sixth grade students selected specific incidents in history and created cartoons depicting those incidents. Under the heading "Change History," they resolved the bullying situations in their cartoons, using strategies presented by Imagination Theatre. The historical situations included events such as the treatment of Native Americans and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Other possibilities in social studies include studying the Holocaust in Europe and apartheid in South Africa as examples of bullying taken to horrific extremes.

Students in several of the foreign language classes discussed prejudice, stereotyping, and racial profiling of individuals and other cultures. Through discussions, readings, and viewing videos, the students learned ways to prevent these attitudes from developing and to appreciate the uniqueness of all people.

In music classes, the students focused on the theme of bullying as they sang and discussed the lyrics of songs such as *Beautiful* by Christina Aguilera; *Don't Laugh at Me* by Peter, Paul, and Mary; *In the Middle* by Jimmy Eat World; and *We Can Work It Out* by the Beatles.

The school social workers went into the reading/language arts classes to help the students understand the difference between bullying and teasing. When someone makes fun of another person in a good-humored way, that is teasing. The person doing the teasing is someone who knows and cares about the other person; usually they are friends who remain friends (Stones, 1993). The social workers also defined the roles of the bully, the victim, and the witness. Then, the students were taught strategies to use in a bullying situation. Finally, students role-played possible bullying situations to practice the strategies presented.

In 2003 as students reflected on the ideas in the stories, each reading class created a statement and an image that were represented on a quilt square: "The

only way to have a friend is to be one," and "A real friend walks in while the rest of the world walks out." These are two of the ideas developed and displayed after the students discussed the themes of the unit. On another square each student in the class and the teacher signed his or her name. The quilt, which is prominently displayed in the front hall of Wood Oaks, is a tangible and beautiful reflection of the ideas developed and lessons taught through literature.

According to Lumsden (2002), a written anti-bullying policy distributed to everyone in the school community can be effective. With this end in mind, the principal of Wood Oaks worked with a group of

Figure 3
Everyday is the same

Everyday is the same.
Not one kid knows my name.
I'm the last to be picked in class.
I wish that this time would just pass.
Every night home alone,
Not one ring from the phone.
Gum stuck in my hair from a classmate,
All of this teasing is what I really hate.
Then one day a girl came up to me,
And said, "What are you doing tonight Melanie B?"
A party at last,
This horrible time has past.
A new beginning for me to start,
Every word will come from my heart.
Getting ready for the party that night,
Making sure everything is right.
Seven o'clock, the time is finally here,
I walk to the door with not one fear.
I walk in the room, no one's in sight.
Then I hear a giggle from the right.
I turn around and see an egg.
The first one they threw was at my leg.
Next my hair was gooey and gross,
Then my stomach got the most.

Laughter and name calling floods the room,
I slam the door with a boom!
Running home it's getting late,
Why does God give me this fate?
Tears drizzle down my cheeks as the rain starts to pour,
Finally I reach my front door.
I got to my room, not one word was said,
I sit down and sob on my bed.
Time doesn't seem to pass, as I stare at the clock,
I start to memorize the rhythm of its "tic tock"
Then my ears begin to pierce as I hear the phone ring,
Since there's been silence for a while, my eardrums begin to sting.
It's as if an old doll has been found and renewed,
Because once that phone rang, I became in a different mood.
I wasn't sure if I should pick it up and see who is calling,
Would I be overwhelmed or start bawling?
I pick it up, I thought I had no choice,
An old lost friend is the recognized voice.
She tells me she is sorry and that she wants to be my friend,
Now it seems that my life won't come to an end.

student volunteers and developed an anti-bullying code that is displayed in every classroom. The code delineates the rights of students to be treated with respect, to be accepted in the school community, to say no to an uncomfortable situation, to not have their physical space violated, and to have their personal property protected (Figure 4).

Conclusion

Sherwin (2004), the author of *Golems Among Us*, speaking on National Public Radio on August 2, 2004, discussed the power of narrative to teach values, citing the Bible as an example. He argued persuasively that a good story has more power than an essay in demonstrating how to behave. Students in middle school are capable of taking a story to a higher level and turning it into something personal and meaningful. (Quinn, Barone, Kearns, Stackhouse, & Zimmerman, 2003). A program that fights bullying through the use of excellent stories offers an effective means to undercut the power and presence of bullies at school.

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Figure 4
Anti-Bullying Code

ANTI-BULLYING CODE

You have the right to be treated with respect, kindness and trust.

You have the right to be accepted and included in the Wood Oaks community.

You have the right to say no when you are not comfortable with a situation.

You have the right not to have your physical space violated.

You have the right to know that your personal property will not be damaged or taken by your peers.

WE SOLVE PROBLEMS PRODUCTIVELY BY STOPPING, THINKING, AND DISCUSSING OUR ACTIONS.